

A Home Friend by [kindness_to_the_rejects](#)

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Summary:

El wants a dog. Hopper definitely does not want a dog. A compromise ensues.

A Home Friend

"I want a dog," El said.

Hopper jumped, startled. He'd been sitting on the couch in relative silence for twenty minutes now, reading the paper. He hadn't even heard Eleven approach, but now here she was, standing next to the couch about a foot from his face. "Jesus, kid, don't sneak around like that."

"Not sneaking," she said.

"Coulda fooled me." He chucked the paper onto the cushion beside him and ran a hand over his face. "What now? What'd you say?"

El huffed slightly, and shuffled her feet.

"Dog," she said, in that way she had, which meant she wanted to say 'duh,' but was above it. "I want one."

"Do you," he said flatly. "Why now all of a sudden, may I ask?"

She averted her gaze to the TV, and moved something behind her back that Hop hadn't even noticed she'd been holding. "No reason," she said.

"Kid," Hop said. "If you say friends don't lie, then that means that," he gestured between the two of them, "Family, or whatever the hell we are now, they don't lie to each other either. Did you see a dog on a TV show lately or somethin'?"

She nodded slowly and pulled out a picture cut out of a magazine from behind her back. It was a picture of –

"Is that Lassie?" Hopper asked incredulously. He took the picture from her, and examined it. It was from a magazine cover from at least five years ago. "Where the hell did you get this?"

"Joyce gave me old mag – magazz –"

"Magazines," Hop finished distractedly. He handed her back the

picture. "Lassie ain't real, kid. Having a dog wouldn't be anything like that."

"What would it be like?" she asked. She was clutching the paper tightly.

Hopper held back a sigh. He loved the kid – more than he'd loved anyone in a long time – but he never liked getting into their drag-out, knock-down fights which still sprung up once in a while. He could feel one brewing over their heads, just because she wanted a dog. And she couldn't have one.

"It'd be risky, that is what it would be like," he said. "Dogs bark – they cause loud noises," he elaborated when she furrowed her brow at bark. "They have to be let out all the time, and they run off sometimes. We can't risk a dog running off and someone finding out where it came from, or someone hearing it bark from the road."

"The road is far," she said stubbornly.

"What if someone is hiking, taking a walk?" he asked. "What if the dog sets off the trip wire? And it might, they run around a lot."

He could see Eleven's emotions beginning to rise. "The days are long," she said stubbornly. "I get lonely. I want a dog!"

"You can't have one, El," he said. "My answer's no."

She face twisted up. She crumpled up the picture of Lassie and threw it at him. She was just about to storm off when he caught her elbow.

"Hey! Wait, wait, wait," he said. He sat up on the edge of the couch, and moved her gently to stand in front of him. The crumpled up magazine picture falls to the floor. "That doesn't – I guess this doesn't have to be the end of it. Remember what we said the other day? About compromises?"

El nodded slowly, tentatively. "That we'd do more of them."

"Right," Hopper said. "I guess – we can compromise on this. Maybe. If we can come up with a compromise that's not too risky."

El settled herself on the coffee table in front of the couch. “Like what?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know, um – why do you want a dog so bad? Just ‘cause it looked fun when you saw it on TV? If this is just an impulse from a movie or something – “

“No,” El said testily. “I’ve been thinking – wanting – for a long time. Since Will’s house. I saw his dog the first time,” She spoke slowly and carefully, as she usually did when she had to string a good number of sentences together. “And saw that he’s Will’s friend. I want a friend.” She tapped herself on the chest.

“You have friends, kid,” he said. “And you get to see them two times a week, already. That was that compromise.”

“I know,” she twisted her fingers together, frustrated. “Not – that kind of friend. A home friend. A friend to be home with me when everyone else is...” she waved a hand toward the door, out beyond it. “Gone doing things.”

Hopper leaned back, considering her. “Does this home friend have to be a dog?” he asked. “Can’t it just be an animal?”

El considered him right back. “Like what?”

“Something that doesn’t make a lot of loud noises,” he said. “Something you don’t have to let out.”

El was quiet a moment. “I want something I can hug,” she said. “Something that likes to be with me.”

Hop’s heart would have melted then and there, but he thought he should save a little bit of his dignity for later.

“I think I got an idea,” he said. “It should fit the bill.”

A week later, Eleven, Hopper, Joyce, and Will all stood outside of Joyce’s car in the Byers’ yard. El was almost trembling with excitement.

"Alright kid," Hopper said. He settled a hand on her shoulder and fixed her with a firm gaze. "What'd we say the plan was?"

"I'm Will's cousin, I'm from Pennsylvania, cats only," she recited.

"That's right – and what about the glasses and the wig?"

El pulled a face out of distaste as she considered the convincing black curls hanging to her shoulders, and the thick brown frames blocking her eyes. "Absolutely leave them on the whole time," she said.

Hop nodded and patted her shoulder. "Good, good. Alright, get going before they run out of all the cats in the shelter. Get in," he opened the car door for her and she scrambled in, probably scared he would change his mind any second. Will got in the other side, and Hop could see him start chatting excitedly with El the moment the door was closed. He turned to Joyce, rolling his eyes. "Jesus, all this excitement over a cat."

Joyce ignored him. "This is sweet of you, Hop, letting her pick out a pet. And letting her out for a bit. You don't think it's too risky?"

He shrugged and tucked his hands into his back pockets. "She's goin' public in September anyway when she goes to school with the boys, and this is April. She should test it out. And she worked hard this winter, catching up on her homeschooling, and hell," he lowered his voice, glanced at El through the window, who was busy talking with her friend. "I feel bad leaving her for so long all the time. It'll be good for her to have some kind of company."

Joyce nodded and fixed him with a smug smile. "You act all tough, but you can't help giving your little girl a cat. It's cute, Hop."

"Hell," he said. "It's not like I'm buying her the moon, it'll be an adopted cat for Christ's sake."

"Still," Joyce said. She fished the car keys out of her coat pocket. "Meet you back here at 4:00?"

"Yeah," Hop said. As Joyce was turning away, he said, "Hey, thanks for this, Joyce. For taking her. I couldn't have – everyone who knows me doesn't think I'd have any reason to take a thirteen-year-old girl

to adopt a cat. It would have sparked attention. So – thanks.”

“Anytime, Hop,” Joyce said, smiling. She turned to leave again.

“Oh, shit, Joyce – “ he said. She turned back, laughing at him.

“Jesus, Hop, yes we’ll be careful – “

He waved a hand. “No, no, I know, not that – just – make sure she picks out a, um – a friendly one.”

“A friendly one.”

“Yea, you know,” he rubbed his beard, self-conscious. “A cuddly one. I know cats aren’t always cuddly, but this one’s gotta be. She wants to – to hug it.” His face was probably beet red at this point.

Joyce looked seconds away from laughing. “Huggable cats only,” she said. “Got it.”

Later that night, Hop wondered what in the hell Joyce had been thinking. He and El were in the living room and looking down on the new addition to their family, who was currently spitting and hissing at them from the couch. This, to Hop’s horror, was the cat El had chosen. And calling it a cat was being liberal.

It was a scrappy tiny thing, barely out of its cat teenage years. Its hair was a rusty orange brown type mixture that ran in stripes around its body, or at least in the places where it didn’t have wispy bald patches. There was a notch in its ear. It was showing its teeth at Hop, and digging its sharp little claws into his couch.

“El,” he said. “What the hell. I thought you wanted cuddly?”

“She doesn’t like you,” El said matter-of-factly. “She likes me.”

Hop gestured to the angry ball of fur and teeth. “She doesn’t seem to.”

“Go in there,” El pointed to the kitchen, behind the couch. “So she

can't see you."

"What? Why – "

"Go," El said emphatically, giving him a light shove.

"Jesus kid, keep your pants on," he said, huffing. He walked around to the kitchen area, giving the couch a wide berth as he went. The cat watched him sharply and hissed at him once more for good measure.

Once in the kitchen, he leaned against the counter and took a cigarette. He lit it and cupped to his mouth, as he watched El and the cat.

El sat hesitantly on the edge of the couch and put her hand out in front of her. The cat, who had gone quiet with Hop out of its line of sight, approached wearily. It sniffed her fingers. She went to pet it, but it veered its head away, so El placed her hand back out and waited.

The cat sniffed El's fingers again, and then her wrist, and then her thumb, and then it rubbed its head against her hand, almost fondly, almost like –

"Well," Hop said, smiling from the kitchen. "I guess it does like you."

"She," El said absentmindedly. She was scratching the cat's ears now. "The man at the shelter said this is a girl cat."

"Mmm hmm," said Hop. "And what made you pick her, exactly? Did you like the way it's ugly as hell?"

"No," El huffed. She looked up at him, and gave him the gaze which made her look like she was much older than she actually was. "She was hurt before they found her," she said. "By a bad man."

Hopper nodded slowly. "And you wanted to give her a nice home, huh?"

"Yes," El said simply. She looked back down at the cat and kept petting her. The cat was actually purring now, tilting her head up so El could scratch under her chin.

Hopper put out his cigarette on the edge of the sink and moved closer to the couch. The cat stopped purring and edged around El instantly, tense. The fur along its back stood up.

“Well, I get why she doesn’t like men,” Hopper said. “But did you have to pick the one cat in the shelter that hates my guts already, kid?”

El laughed. And Hopper decided the cat could scratch him to hell for all he cared.